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An Historical and Biographical
Sketch of the Hymn

“Nearer My God to Thee”

Its Author, and the Poet Robert
Browning's relation to
its composition



*With an Account of South Place Chapel, Finsbury,
London, England*

By

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The Church Founded by Our Lord Jesus; The Believer's Manual on Baptism; Christian Stewardship, or, How Much Owest Thou My Lord?; Satan a Personality; Historical Sketch of the Second Baptist Church, Baltimore, Md.; Let Your Light So Shine; Diotrephes, or, The Bad Deacon; Moved With Envy; Helping The Ungodly; A Church Contrasted With "The Church"; Joy in Believing; Triumph and Glory; Infidelity and Atheism, Both Ancient and Modern; Bible Stories for Young and Old; The Parson That "Nobs and Bobs" a Bit; The Chained Bible; Protestantism Before and After the Reformation; Sprinkling Not New Testament Baptism; Sabbath Not Sunday; The Good Shepherd; Are You a Christian?; Snouty's Conversion; Happy Jack; Mary Did It; "Oh! Sir, That's My Mother"; "Flabby Nell"; "Light in Ireland"; "Out of Stony Grief"; "The Evil Tongue"; An Incident and a Coincident; Think on These Things; Dr. Isaac Watts' Contribution to Hymnology; The Rite of Confirmation Un-Apostolic; Historical Sketch of the Pittsgrove Baptist Church; The Life and Times of Rev. Thomas Patient; Apostolic Succession a Mythological Farce; etc., etc.

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“Nearer My God to Thee”

THE origin and history of this ever popular Hymn and its authoress will doubtless be of interest to the great multitudes that express their gratitude to our common Lord, both in the public assemblies and in their home circles. The occasion that suggested writing the poem to the mind of its authoress is not generally known to the world-wide masses and classes, whose hearts have been made tender toward God, in moments of sweet soul-uplift, while they sing the words, “Nearer My God to Thee.”

The authoress, whose maiden name was Sarah Flower, was of English birth and of Baptist parentage. She was born at London, February 22, 1805, and composed the hymn, “Nearer My God to Thee,” when she was in the twenty-first year of her age. Miss Flower was married to Mr. William B. Adams in May, 1829, and lived a happy married life. Mr. Adams was a strong Unitarian, unyielding in his views and of a very decided temperament characteristic of the Englishman. His wife, Sarah Flower Adams, was of a religious temperament and remained true to her Baptist belief and training throughout her lifetime. Sarah Flower Adams was a gifted woman, of rare intellectual and poetical ability. She composed a number of poems, which were much prized by the literary critics, for their fervent, devotional and spiritual uplifting sentiments prior and subsequent to her marriage to Mr. Adams. Sarah Flower Adams was not a strong, robust physique, but of marvelous energetic temperament. She was devotedly attached to her only sister Elizabeth, whose death in 1846 had such a marked effect on her health that she never fully recovered from the shock, and followed Elizabeth in death two years after, August 15, 1848.

The hymn, “Nearer My God to Thee,” was not in general use among Chapel Folks for several years after its first presentation by the two sisters, Elizabeth and Sarah Flower, who sang it at the South Place Chapel, Finsbury, as a duet on a number of occasions before it caught the popular attention. The English publisher, Mr. John Julian, A.M., published the “Dictionary of Hymnology,” and republished it in America. Mr. Julian says that “the hymn went through a number of variations and changes, and that

W. J. Fox, Esq., first published it in 1841 in his 'Hymns and Anthems.' " From that day it took an advanced place in the forefront of the popular esteem of the church world, and continues to be numbered among the most popular hymns sung in the churches of every phase of the Christian faith."

In a comparatively recent issue of a leading daily of New York City, the question was asked of its readers if they would vote for their favorite hymn, just like they voted to determine the National flower, and the result of the enormous vote extending several days, the Sarah Flower hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee," was second on the list, and a close trailer to the Coronation Hymn, "Crown Him Lord of All," which was first. This shows at a glance the strong place still held in the popular esteem and regard of the hymn-singing public, "Nearer My God to Thee," has up to date.

Objection has been raised in some quarters to the hymn because the name of Christ does not appear in the original version, and attempts have been made to remedy the so-called omission of the Saviour's name. The Rev. Arthur T. Russell attempted, among others, to cover the omission with the following stanza :

"Christ alone heareth me
Where Thou dost shine,
Joint heir He maketh me,
Of the Divine.
In Christ my soul shall be
Nearest my God to Thee,
Nearest to Thee."

The Rev. Dr. Whitley calls attention to "The fact that the Trustees were not satisfied with the hymn, as Miss Sarah Flower wrote it, and asked the Editor to write a final verse, but I am glad to say that our standard book, the 'Baptist Church Hymnal,' ignores the addition."

Benjamin Flower and wife moved from their home town, Harlow, and came "up to London" in 1804 and located at Finnisbury, the then growing suburb of London, and engaged in conducting a "Draper's Shop" for their livelihood. Benjamin Flower and Elizabeth, his wife, were both in fellowship with the South Place Chapel, Finnisbury, which was located in the immediate neighborhood of their shop, and where he and his family resided in the dwelling portion of his business premises, a very common custom among the middle class English shopkeepers, and which prevails

largely to this day with the small English shopkeepers. Great and marked changes took place at Finnisbury, in common with all the nearby suburbs. The rapid growth of the population, coupled with the immense development in the commercial life of London, made it very difficult indeed to maintain the South Place Chapel as a distinct Baptist Meeting House. The removals incident to the changed conditions pressed very heavily upon the loyal little group of Baptists and occasioned a giving up of much that had been long cherished, and so much esteemed among Baptist Folks. "The stranger came within the gates" and outnumbered the little Baptist fellowship, who still lived at Finnisbury and worshiped within the South Place Chapel. The record of the effective and efficient ministry of Rev. William Vidler, whose early labors had a great and marked effect upon the doctrinal and spiritual life of South Place Chapel during his extended ministry of many years, and yet, notwithstanding the great and esteemed labors of Rev. William Vidler, at South Place Chapel and vicinity, it is strange to relate, Mr. Vidler later became a victim to that anti-Scriptural fad of Bumpology, and his later teachings were foreign to the generally accepted views of the regular Baptist.

The theories of Mr. Vidler's predecessor, the noted Universalist, Rev. Elkanna Winchester, appear to have had a deterrent effect upon the spiritual development of the South Place Chapel, Finnisbury, for many years after his retirement. His erroneous views were held by many of the congregation and occasioned no little unrest and concern. Mr. Winchester was a strong and striking personality, and, like all men of his caliber, secured a following in the community. His strong advocacy of that farcical hallucination led to the spiritual undoing of many in his day, and doubtless to the "remnant that remained." Mr. Vidler's later ministry at South Place Chapel became impaired because of his changed views of truth. Unfortunately, many of the English Dissenters of those peculiar times were more or less disturbed by the fallacious and erroneous teachings of this revived school of error, which swept over the British Isles, and the American Continent during the late Seventeenth and early Eighteenth centuries.

The Rev. W. T. Whitley, M.A., LL.D., fellow of the Royal Historic Society, and secretary of English Baptist Historic Society, writing under date of January 13, 1913, says: "There is a curious bit of development about South Place Chapel, Finnisbury, founded by Elkanna Winchester, the Universalist. It became very popular under Rev. William Vidler, and took on a Baptist hue. But he further became Unitarian, and so the Church rent, and while it

did remain Baptist in a sense, that was not, therefore, the dominant note. Under Fox, I expect, it lost altogether that tinge, being distinctly Unitarian. Its after changes converted it into a merely Ethical Society."

J. R. Smith, Esq., says: "The change from the distinct Baptist polity and doctrine of the South Place Chapel, Finsbury, is due to the changing conditions of its surroundings, and chiefly to the removals of the Baptist Christians to other districts. Finsbury went like all other metropolitan suburbs. The old South Place Chapel, in common with other unaffiliated Union dissenting Chapels, in those peculiar times, suffered at the hands of the local Anglican vicar, and the oppressive measures of the "Sidesman," ably supported by the ecclesiastical authorities 'higher up.'"

Notwithstanding the changed conditions effected by removals and the commercial development, Benjamin Flower and family continued to reside at the "Draper Shop" and worship at South Place Chapel. The death of Mrs. Elizabeth Flower, the wife and mother, was a great and severe loss to the family. The two daughters were drawn closer together and were constant companions, and deeply interested in "Chapel Services." The young sisters were "gifted in song," and often rendered selections at the public services. Shortly after the death of the wife and mother, a new minister came into notice. The Rev. George J. Fox, the distinguished Unitarian minister, was invited to the pastorate of the South Place Chapel. The congregation became under Mr. Fox's ministry overwhelmingly Unitarian in sentiment, the growing views being held by many dissenting ministers. The Rev. George J. Fox, it is said, was a man of unusual scholastic ability, of strong and striking personality, a preacher of great eloquence, a gentleman of fine parts and of a very gracious spirit. Rev. Mr. Fox became a very noted minister in the Unitarian body, and attracted to South Place Chapel a fine congregation, noted for its intellectual and social life. "The Cockneys went to Finsbury to hear the eloquent Fox."

Some few years after the death of Mrs. Elizabeth Flower, the father, Benjamin Flower, followed her in death, leaving Elizabeth and Sarah orphans. G. C. Pomeroy, the English author, said, in the extended published article of the "Telegraph" of November, 1912, that "the Rev. George J. Fox was appointed guardian of Elizabeth and Sarah Flower, the two beautiful and talented daughters of his friend, Benjamin Flower, on the death of their father and became members of his household, which was in the vicinity of Browning's home. The boy Browning was about twelve years

old when his mother first became acquainted with the two young women, who were nine and seven years his senior."

This is in perfect agreement with Mr. John Luckham, the bookseller and publisher's account, when he says: "The young sisters, Elizabeth and Sarah, were received into the home of Rev. George J. Fox, but they had been well grounded in the truth and love of their Saviour. They, like their sainted parents, had rejoiced in the redemptive work, and had put on Christ in baptism." This is in direct confirmation and agreement with Dr. Whitley's reference to Miss Sarah Flower. "It was easy enough to verify and see that her father had been at Harlow where I rather think he had been minister, but of this I am not certain."

The Baptists, especially the English Baptists, have all along the trail of their history enjoyed the labors of gifted lay brethren in the "Ministry of the Word," and Benjamin Flower, the shopkeeper of Finnisbury, doubtless labored in his home town at Harlow, in a measure like his honored father in the work of the Gospel, but not in the settled pastorate. Of Benjamin Flower's preaching at outstations while at Finnisbury, both Messrs. Luckham and Newnam are silent.

"The young ladies, Elizabeth and Sarah, grew to be very much attached to Mr. Fox, who, on the death of their father, was appointed guardian and executor. The young women became members of Mr. Fox's household, which was located in the very near vicinity of the home of the family of the poet, Robert Browning. Robert was then about twelve years of age when his mother first became acquainted with the two young ladies, Elizabeth and Sarah Flower."

Dr. Whitley further writes, agreeable to the English customs and traditions of the Englishman being Captain of the Ship, and Lord of the Castle, which has prevailed in the British Isles from time immemorial: "Miss Flower is rather better known in England by her married name, Sarah Flower Adams." This doubtless accounts, largely, for the commonly accepted idea, so generally received, that Miss Sarah Flower was a Unitarian, because of the overshadowing importance in England of the husband over the wife. S. C. Pomeroy, the English critic, in writing for the English "Telegraph," says that "Sarah and sister Elizabeth first sang as a duet in the South Place Chapel, where they led the singing. Browning had already outgrown the period of atheism which had troubled his friend, but it is doubtful if the hymn which is so dearly loved by thousands would ever have been written if it had not been for his influence upon Miss Sarah Flower. So it is en-

tirely due to the singular, and unexpected meetings of the young and ardent Browning with the gentle, spiritual young woman, Sarah Flower, the world is indebted for the inspirational hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee."

The hymn, while it does not mention the name of Christ, thrills through with the spirit of the Christ, and the suppliant tone is only equaled by its pathetic appeal to the Spirit of Him who "fillet all and in all."

"The boy, Robert Browning, was about twelve years of age when his mother first became acquainted with the two young ladies, who were nine and seven years his senior. Robert, in company with his mother very often visited the home of Mr. Fox, and there met the two young sisters who became much interested in the youth; a strong attachment was soon formed between the young people; they had many things in common, and freely gave vent to their ideas." Robert, in the ardour of his youth, was very marked and pronounced in his views against revealed religion, and his distinctive controversial and combative temperament, so characteristic of the young lad, who had read much and thought more upon the agnostic and atheistical literature so common in his day, had just caught the poetical vision and composed his first verses, which he read to his young friends. He called his first poetical production "Incondita," which, it is claimed with much regret, Browning destroyed subsequently, but not however before his fond mother had herself shown them to the young ladies, and they in turn had secretly shown them to their guardian, the Rev. Mr. Fox, who at once recognized the merit of the composition and became much interested in the youthful poet and urged him to continue and pursue his poetical fancies, and in every way the clerical friend aided and encouraged the promising lad to compose verses.

The friendship formed beneath the roof of the Rev. Mr. Fox and his wards, toward the Browning family was very mutual and friendly and extended over a period of several years. The young ladies had acquired and developed a literary taste under the direction of their guardian, and were quite fond of music, especially classical. They were both gifted with good voices and often sang duets at the South Place Chapel, where they led the singing. The Brownings were also a musical family, and very naturally enjoyed the society of so splendid a company as Mr. Fox's household. They consequently were much associated together and were frequent guests at each others home. The eldest sister, Elizabeth, became the ideal woman to the young poet, he very



THE MISSES ELIZABETH AND SARAH FLOWER

Sarah, author of the hymn "Nearer My God to Thee," was two years younger than Elizabeth.

often wrote her boyish verses and letters, which he destroyed when they fell into his hands in later years. Elizabeth Flower was a meek spirited charming personality, and Robert, with his ardent, youthful notions, was much pleased with her winsome, cultured manners, hence it is Elizabeth, the eldest sister, it is repeatedly claimed, who inspired his first ambitious poem, "Pauline." His attachment and admiration for the eldest sister did not act, however, as a stair-bar to his greater infatuation for the younger sister, Sarah, whom he made his confidante. It was to Sarah he confided his ideals, his thoughts on religion and the drama, he unbosomed himself freely to her about his longings to go on the stage. The dramatic profession appealed strongly to his imaginative temperament. He enjoyed discussing the subject of the drama with his young friend. The theatre held a large place in the thought of young Browning's time. Society and the quality generally were loud in their praise. So, in common with the popular thought of his day, Robert Browning expressed his ambition to become an actor to Sarah Flower; and in return, much to the young poet's delight, Sarah, who also had a strong liking for the drama and a feverish desire to become an actress, expressed her thought on the subject to Robert, and laughingly she related her ambition in that direction. The result was that there sprang up between the young poet, Robert Browning, and his friend, Sarah Flower, a deeper confidence, and a strong bond of attachment was formed between them. The young, light-hearted woman found herself in the position, not only in that of a close friend, but the advisor to a youth who was passing through a period of atheistic doubt, for it was about this time in young Browning's career that he had become infatuated and imbued with the poetry of Shelley, and had further began to take a deep interest in all the current popular phases of infidel and atheistic literature, and especially was he impressed with the philosophical bumpology of the keen French infidel lance, Voltaire, who had become strongly entrenched in the literary thought of the age, and a prime favorite to the imaginative mind of the young poet. It was just at this important formative period of Robert Browning's life that Sarah Flower began to realize that she, too, was drifting away from her spiritual moorings, that the atheistical tides were sweeping in upon her soul-life and that her doubts were giving rise to many troubled thoughts which affected her peace of mind. She became involved in her own arguments and thus wrote of her great perplexity to her guardian, the following: "My mind has been wandering a long time and now seems to have lost sight of

that only hold against the assaults of this warring world, a firm belief in the genuineness of the Scriptures. The cloud has come over me gradually and I did not discover the darkness in which my soul was shrouded until in seeking to give light to others, my own gloomy state became too settled to admit of doubt. * * * It is in answering Robert Browning that my mind refused to bring forward arguments, turned recreant and sided with the enemy." Later, Sarah Flower said that in seeking a way out of her "stony griefs," she wrote the hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee," which she composed during one of those crucial times of mental and spiritual struggle, the light shone in, and Sarah, accompanied by her sister, Elizabeth, first sang the hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee," as a duet in the South Place Chapel. Robert Browning had by this time outgrown the period of his atheism which had given so much trouble to his friends, especially Sarah Flower, but under the good providence of God, the trouble occasioned by the young poet's doubt and atheistic controversies with Sarah Flower, became the means to a good end. God graciously enlarged the vision of the young authoress and she gave to the world the hymn which is so much loved, and it is possible and probable (humanly speaking) that if Robert Browning had not questioned and argued with his friend, she would have never penned the popular poem that reaches and fills so large a place in the affectionate esteem of the great world of Christians. It was Browning's influence upon Sarah Flower—whose heart bled with the anguishing cry—she expressed her sentiment and wrote "Nearer My God to Thee."

The history of the hymn and Browning's association and connection with its origin came to the attention of a visitor to the library of the British Museum, who was desirous of securing information relative to the history of another matter entirely foreign to the topic herein stated. While engaged in research work, a large lot of bound pamphlets from a collection of miscellaneous papers was, purely by chance, placed before the notice of the visitor, and in reading over some of the pamphlets the history and centenary of the South Place Chapel, Finsbury, was read with interest and the story of the origin of "Nearer My God to Thee" and Robert Browning's association with it came to light. The references are as interesting as they are informing to the lover of hymnology of the church militant.

The South Place Chapel, Finsbury, engaged the ministry of the gifted pastor, Rev. George J. Fox, for several years and he left a large place in the affectionate regard of his parishioners, and not

among the least of his congregation, were the Misses Elizabeth and Sarah Flower, his wards, and the Browning family.

The hymn was sung in the South Place Chapel, Finsbury, by the congregation in their public services for several years prior to the publication. Since then it has grown in the loving esteem of the whole Church universal, until the hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee," is not any more English or American than elsewhere; it is not national, but international, and has long since outgrown the prescribed limitations of any particular part or phase of the church life. It is suitable to all "sorts and conditions of men," meeting the cry and needs of the human heart, the wide world over.

It is said in both the English and American reports of the sad and deplorable catastrophe that overtook the ill-fated steamship "Titanic," the company gathered around the ship's band while they blended their hearts together in deep sympathetic sorrow in the final moment, just as the ship sank beneath their feet. As they were about entering their watery grave the whole company united in singing "Nearer My God to Thee."

It is a very striking, significant, and singular coincidence that this ever popular hymn should have been brought so prominently before the public notice at the time of the centenary of the distinguished poet who inspired it. Robert Browning was so very intimately associated with its composition that he, in a word, was the occasion of its origin.

The poetical expression and conception of the hymn is only equaled by its grasp of the infinite love it presents. Received as a literary production, it is a marvelous gem, and as a poem that bodies forth the cry of the human heart in its up-reaching after God, and, if not superior to any other, is equal to any in all the wide range and scope of the hymnology of the Church, and doubtless will continue to hold front rank in the esteem of the future church as it has in the church of the past. Its place is warmly cherished in the affectionate regard of thousands who have "passed over the line," to the "great beyond," and will doubtless be used in the assemblies of the days to come, whose countless multitudes of those yet unborn, will praise God for Sarah Flower Adams' hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee."

I was privileged to deliver an address on the history and origin of the hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee," to the Ministers' Conference in Philadelphia, May, 1913, and the local Philadelphia newspaper press gave an extended notice. I also spoke to the Baptist Ministers' Conference at Brooklyn, New York, December 1, 1913. See account in "Baptist Commonwealth," December 4, 1913; also

the Pittsburgh press made extended notices of the fact that Sarah Flower, the authoress of the hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee," was a Baptist and not a Unitarian, as generally supposed.

THE AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THE READER.

Since the publication of the first edition of the history of the hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee," and the biographical sketch of its authoress, which appeared in 1912, I have been repeatedly urged and requested by literary friends, both in Europe and in our own land, to publish a second and enlarged edition.

In view of the fact that kind friends in the United States, and especially in England, have encouraged me by forwarding items and incidents that led me to believe it is worth while to publish this second edition, in the hope that it will meet the same cordial and generous reception that was accorded the first edition, both from my Unitarian and Trinitarian correspondents, all of whom were as sweet-spirited as they were commendatory, and as cordial and fraternal as they were Christian and lovable.

I wish especially to thank and acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr. John Luckham, of St. Mary's, Southampton, England, bookseller and publisher, for the photos of Elizabeth and Sarah Flower, and, if I am correctly informed, the photo was for many years in the possession of the Luckham family, and, further, it is claimed Mr. John Luckham was a blood relative of the Flower family, who were originally from the "Midlands." Also to J. R. Smith, Esq., J. P. and Councillor, the well-known research authority and title examiner of the "English Bar," for the historical account of South Place Chapel, Finsbury, London. Also to Mr. William Newnam, of the British Ordnance Survey, for the account of Sarah Flower's connection with the Baptist Fellowship. Also to the Rev. W. T. Whitley, M.A., LL.D., Secretary of the English Baptist Historical Society, London, England; and last, but not least, to the learned Editor of the English "Telegraph" for the splendid informing and extended article of November 15, 1912, on Sarah Flower and Browning, the poet. To each and all of the aforesaid I extend my thanks and appreciation, and in view of my acknowledged indebtedness to the aforesaid authors and authorities quoted.

May I further say that there has appeared at various times, in our newspaper press and in the columns of our weekly and monthly denominational and circular periodicals, notice of the ori-

gin of the hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee," and both the date and place of the birth of the authoress, and her religious associations and convictions have been freely presented, and in addition to the aforesaid notice of the "Press," there has been no small company of hymn book editors and contributors to hymnology who have given their version and had their "story to tell" agreeable to their own source of information, and they, like the men in Paul's day, "cried one thing and some another."

I freely state in all fairness to the reader after an honest conviction based upon a careful, thorough and painstaking investigation of the facts historically and biographically. I have given what I believe to be the origin of the hymn, the date and place of birth of its authoress, her family connections and her religious affiliations; and further, I have given the reader my authorities, all of whom are well known in the sphere of their activities, and within reach of the reading public.

JOSHUA E. WILLS.



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